

Spreading the Zing: Reimagining Public Media Through the Makers Quest 2.0

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Executive Summary:

Public media projects are moving from familiar broadcast forms to multiplatform models that are often more open and participatory. In light of this, how can we best evaluate their impact? And what elements of impact are most salient in the public media context, in which mission is as central as sustainability or reach?

This paper sets out to examine these questions through the lens of a particular set of projects designed to demonstrate how “public radio” can be transformed into “public media.” The Public Radio Makers Quest 2.0 competition (MQ2), which was designed and administered by the Association of Independents in Radio (AIR), supported eight multiplatform, participatory radio projects led by independent and station-based producers. The MQ2 projects, funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, launched simultaneously in April 2009, with support and “incubator” partnerships at NPR and local public radio outlets guaranteed through August 2009. Because of their shared structure and time frame, these eight MQ2 experiments serve as a unique test bed for assessing the strategies, techniques, and possible outcomes of public media 2.0 projects.

American University’s Center for Social Media (CSM) partnered with AIR to develop a survey tool designed to capture various outcomes of these projects. We recognized from the start that there is not yet enough data available about use of digital media to show us solid trends or allow us to draw firm conclusions relative to public behavior. What follows is an analysis of survey data gathered from each project as well as related best practices and questions for public media 2.0 assessment. We also have made some recommendations for further developing a new methodology to gauge impact for public media.

CSM researchers are particularly interested in examining whether the MQ2 projects meet the criteria for “public media” laid out in their white paper *Public Media 2.0: Dynamic, Engaged Publics*. For CSM, public media projects’ function is to convene “publics”—groups of people using media in democratic societies for the purposes of learning, deliberation, and action around shared issues. Traditional broadcast metrics do not reliably capture such public engagement, so over the course of this research CSM and AIR worked to refine a suite of “elements of impact” to help us begin to determine if publics have formed around a particular public media project.

AIR is interested in identifying best practices (and lessons learned) for producers, stations, and distributors tasked with inventing new media forms. A further goal for AIR is to present concrete “change models” for traditional media organizations seeking to develop their own R & D initiatives. The analysis below examines the role that MQ2 plays as a model for developing infrastructure to support emerging public media production.

The evaluation model proposed in this paper examines impact of the MQ2 projects through several interlocking impact elements: reach, inclusion, engagement, influence, and an unfamiliar new term—“zing,” which marries an older set of production practices designed to move audiences intellectually or emotionally to the new capacity to involve, engage, and collaborate with them directly in constructing public media projects.

Recommendations

There is an opportunity to move beyond established standards of success that have defined public broadcasting productions of the past. These standards, such as listener loyalty, were defined by the limitations of the broadcast technology. The profound evolution of media forms and approaches to craft as demonstrated by projects like MQ2 call for a new vision of who public media users are, what effect multiplatform work has on them, and whether they are being encouraged to learn, debate, and act as informed members of a democracy.

The new vision of public media 2.0 impact moves beyond loyalty or “holding” an individual in place and instead brings into focus individuals who are in motion: responding to the work of producers calling for participation, for example, by inviting them to leave their cars after listening to a broadcast feature in order to go out on their streets to take pictures; to then go online to Flickr and upload those pictures; to take the Flickr link and post it to Facebook or send it out via e-mail. Along the way, the goal is that public media users learn something—that they debate a contentious issue or join a related network—in other words, that they are moved to engage more profoundly in the issues and culture of the day. As a field, public media should provide citizens with the capacity to not only consume information, but also to seek more, to compare notes, to participate meaningfully in public life. And it should be judged primarily on this basis.

Current tools and approaches for assessing whether public media projects are engaging publics in this way are partial and fragmented. Based on the analysis that follows, we offer the following recommendations to the field:

1. A new methodology must be developed for assessing multiplatform public media projects that combine television, radio, online and social media, mobile and other emerging platforms. This methodology should be distinguished from commercial impact assessment schemes in that it prioritizes assessment of public media’s core function—providing content, platforms, and trusted contexts that move users to act as engaged citizens.
2. This converged public media impact methodology should incorporate approaches associated with other forward-looking models for assessing impact—such as the “triple bottom line” standards established for sustainable business—and rely on standards related to social return on investment and the wider ecology of a given field.
3. The impact of the public media must be measured not only through quantitative audience and participation metrics, but also through qualitative accounts such as the role that projects play in the lives of users and communities—whether, for example, they influence public debates—or how decisions made by the creator(s) at the level of craft affect the final outcome of a project relative to impact.
4. The development of a new public media impact methodology will have profound impact on the culture, language, and practices of the field. It is therefore imperative that the process be inclusive and transparent, relying on a broad range of input from stakeholders that range from metrics professionals to industry leaders to independent producers to members of the public.
5. A new entity should be identified or created whose task is to standardize evaluation of the new elements of impact. It should not be assumed that such an entity will be centered at one organization, but might rather be a collaborative group, with each focusing on a different element of impact.

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The Impact of MQ2's Mapping Main Street

